

The challenge: to convince potential funders and legislators of the value of research collections in a university museum

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Resumo

Um dos maiores desafios que os museus universitários enfrentam consiste em convencer o público, as autoridades oficiais e governamentais e os mecenas privados do valor científico das suas colecções. Muitas vezes, a percepção destes enquanto visitantes resume-se a vastas quantidades de espécimens quase idênticos, cuja importância e razão de existência lhes escapa frequentemente. Sensibilizar para o valor científico destas colecções requer uma capacidade em estabelecer pontes directas entre a investigação por um lado, e os interesses do público, do governo ou dos mecenas por outro. Algo que, muitas vezes, tem de ser feito com consideráveis doses de imaginação.

Abstract

One of the greatest challenges for university museums is to convince the public, the government, and private donors of the value of scientific collections. Too many visitors experience museum collections as simply vast quantities of nearly identical bird skins, mammal bones, pressed plants, without understanding why they are there and what larger function they serve. To communicate the importance of collections requires an ability to connect museum research with the interests of the public, government or donors, something which at times requires considerable imagination

The University of Alaska Museum

The University of Alaska Museum (UAM) was founded in 1927, when the college president sent a local adventurer, Otto Geist, to the Bering Sea and other northern regions to collect archaeological and ethnographic materials. Soon he was adding Pleistocene remains to his culture history acquisitions. Geist's collections, along with some paintings that had been in the President's offices, were the earliest collections of a museum which now holds more than 1.25 million specimens and artefacts organized into the departments of

anthropology and history, archaeology, botany, entomology, ethnographic film, geology and palaeontology, fine arts, ichthyology, mammalogy, ornithology. Nine curators hold faculty positions, teach undergraduate and graduate students, and receive tenure in academic departments. There is also a frozen tissue collection curated jointly by the biology curators.

UAM is in Fairbanks, population approximately 70,000, located near the centre of Alaska, not far south of the Arctic Circle. The University of Alaska Fairbanks, the flagship campus of a state-wide

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system, offers the full range of degrees including the Ph.D. in a variety of disciplines. Its greatest strength is arctic and subarctic research, and the Geophysical Institute, International Arctic Research Centre and Institute of Arctic Biology are internationally recognized and well regarded. The campus has approximately 7,000 students; most undergraduates come from Alaska while graduate students come from other parts of the United States as well as other countries.

From October to April, UAM serves the university and community. Undergraduate and graduate students do research in the laboratories, and faculty bring their students to the museum for classes. 70% of greater Fairbanks elementary students attend our excellent school programs. From May to September, our galleries are crowded with tourists. Currently UAM welcomes 86,000 visitors a year (70,000 in the summer), down from a high of 140,000 in 1993. What happened then was the two largest tour companies in the state decided to withdraw the museum from their city tours and instead bring their clients to two mining theme parks. It is our expectation that these companies will return when the expanded museum opens.

The expansion project

In 1980, UAM moved into what was then a state of the art building of 410 square meters. That structure had been planned to be larger than the funding allowed, and as soon as its doors opened discussions commenced on building Phase II of the museum. When I was hired in 1993, the Chancellor announced that it was finally time to seriously work on expanding the museum, and thus began eight trying years of fund raising – and consciousness-raising. With considerable community input, we decided to have as the expanded museum's centrepiece a 90 square meter Gallery of Alaska Art. Our interpretation would concentrate on several themes, the most important of which is the equal value of Native and non-Native art, a concept not universally shared by the museum-going public in Alaska or even elsewhere in the country.

The prerequisite for a successful fund raising project is recognized quality. This was not a problem for most aspects of our project. *Alaska Magazine's* readers voted us the best museum in Alaska. The public sees and appreciates our outstanding exhibits, and attends our varied programs such as live performances of Alaska Natives performing traditional athletic acts, interactive presentations on the aurora, and lectures on wide ranging topics such as Native Alaska art, insects and the environment, dinosaur excavations. School children thoroughly enjoy their class visits to the museum, and families happily attend a variety of Saturday programs we have developed. We are privileged to have an active and enthusiastic support group, the Friends of the University of Alaska Museum, who devote much time to lobbying for the museum in Juneau, the state capital. We also assembled a group of 60 volunteers to serve in various capacities on the Northern Treasures Museum Expansion Campaign. In the United States, successful fund raising depends upon a peer asking a prospect to donate for a cause he or she supports. Without the willingness of these volunteers to ask their friends for money, we would never have been able to reach our goal.

We planned to add 390 square meters to the current museum to double the size to 800 square meters, and completely renovate the current facility with the exception of the existing collections range, which is still in excellent condition. The budget for this was \$31 million, only 50% of which the state of Alaska was willing to provide. We had to raise the rest from non-state sources. It was not hard to explain to potential donors the need for the new art gallery, as many members of our community had expressed a keen desire to see our fine arts collection on display instead of in the museum basement. Because so many in the community and the state wish to improve education, there was a positive response for expanding the educational facilities to include an auditorium as well as an education centre for both school children and university students. And since we must generate over 60% of our operating budget, everyone was sympathetic to the need for an expanded museum store and a cafe.

Unfortunately, very few people within the community and the state knew that in addition to being a fine exhibits and public programs museum we were a well-regarded academic institution with outstanding collections and innovative research projects. An interesting challenge presented itself: to communicate the value of our collections and research to a public not necessarily interested in systematics, frozen tissues, and thousands of identical-seeming voles floating in alcohol. This challenge was but one facet of a larger one: to make this entire expansion appealing to donors.

The architecture

The first step was to hire an architect who would design a distinctive building that communicated the special sense of place that is Alaska. Joan Sorzano of Hammel Green Abrahamson Architects in

Minneapolis, Minnesota, created an outstanding structure inspired by ice (Fig. 1). When the Director of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation saw the model, she commented that this building could *only* be in Alaska – and sent us a check for \$1 million. Although some residents found the design somewhat outré, the vast majority of Fairbanksans and Alaskans supported it enthusiastically. We anticipate this building to receive a great deal of attention when it opens in 2005, and thus attract increased visitation. Our very conservative goal is 140,000, the same number we had before the major tour companies dropped UAM from their city tours; we hope of course that the numbers will be far higher than that!

The curators were to receive 90 square meters of expanded space, which would be added to their renovated space of 160 square meters, making their total 270 square meters, approximately 33% of the

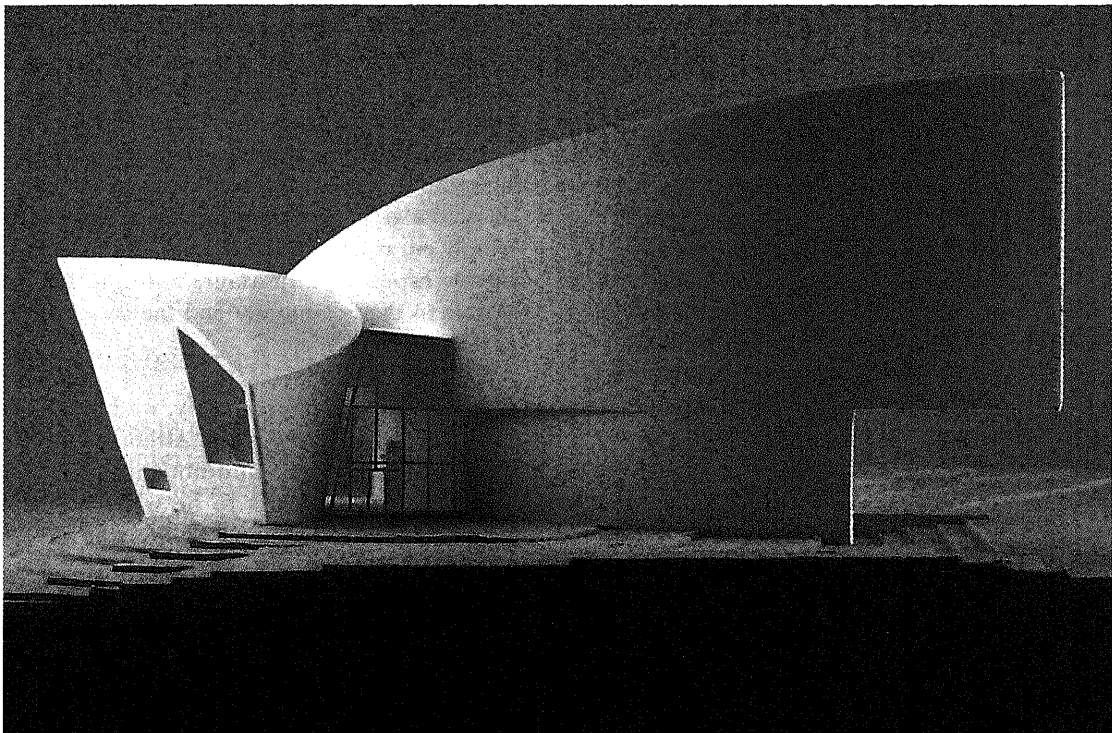


Fig. 1 – Model of University of Alaska Museum in 2005, southeast view. Hammel Green Abrahamson/GDM architects, Minneapolis and Anchorage (Photo by Barry McWayne © UAM).

entire expanded museum. They were charged with deciding amongst themselves what should go into their area. After long meetings and not a few struggles, the curators decided upon 150 square meters for collections space and 120 square meters for curatorial/research areas that include collections laboratories including a PCR free room and ancient DNA facility, a biohazard level 2 blood laboratory for preparing biological specimens, and a dirt laboratory for preparing geological and archaeological pieces.

For the time being, the curators were finished with their responsibilities. (They would eventually need to submit grants to raise funds to equip their laboratories.) I, in contrast, had to figure out how to make this so enthralling to potential donors that they enthusiastically gave money specifically for collections and research. Some potential funding sources, we knew, would never support research; the legislature of the State of Alaska, for example, felt that research was frivolous, and the university should only teach undergraduates. Since there was no hope of changing their minds, we just asked them for funds for the educational parts of the building.


Raising money for science

We needed to find someone from outside the university community who would validate our mission, and that came first from the US \$1 million we received from the Gates Foundation. Here was a very rich, very prestigious foundation that thought enough of us to donate a generous sum. Shortly thereafter, one of Alaska's United States senators brought to Fairbanks the Chairman of the Board of the Smithsonian Museum of American History, who was so smitten by UAM he wrote a letter to the Senator saying we were the best museum in the state, and for a regional institution, without peer. We publicized this letter widely. People who up to that point had been lukewarm about our project suddenly began taking us seriously. My colleagues and I at the university could promote the museum as much as we could, but only when someone not in the organization, and, preferably, not even in the state said we were good, people listened.

Then, with the help of a public relations consultant who helped us design campaign materials that would communicate our message effectively, we began a campaign to inform the public about the collections and research. It is a fundamental principle of advertising that the more times you say the same thing, the more people will believe it. So at every possible opportunity, the University President, the Chancellor, and I talked about how wonderful and exciting UAM's research and collections were. We did not ignore exhibits and education, but they actually sold themselves fairly effectively. We featured research and collections in every brochure, newsletter, and solicitation letter. We started a series of advertisements in the local newspaper with the heading "Did you know....?" followed by some fascinating fact from our curators and their collections (Fig. 2). For example, we ran "Did you know that birds held in the ornithology department offer keys to understanding infectious diseases that can effect humans" Whenever there was a dinner party at the museum hosted by the University or some community organization, we placed as centrepieces objects from our collections, including a meteorite, a dinosaur fossil, and a Yu'pik basket; I always explained that these treasures came from our outstanding collections, and provided data for incredibly important scientific research. And we devoted a great deal of energy focusing on two areas in which curators were working that fascinate many people especially: dinosaurs and infectious diseases. People in the community and the state began to learn about us.

But perhaps most importantly, we brought the public to the curators themselves. Although hired for their academic credentials and not their social skills, we asked all the curators to be willing to speak at a moment's notice to guests we brought into their labs. It was the curators alone who could speak with passion about the importance of their collections and research. For three years, I led innumerable people "downstairs" for a visit that became the highlight of each prospect's museum experience. The curators were excellent spokespersons for their areas, and ended up enjoying the interactions, but were also pleased when they ended.

Museum Treasures




Sharing Alaska
with the World

Did You Know ...

... that millions of birds
come from six continents
to Alaska to breed and
raise their young each
year?

Researchers at the
University of Alaska
Museum are studying
these migrant birds to
find out what diseases
they bring to
North America.



UNIVERSITY OF
ALASKA
MUSEUM

Northern Treasures

(907) 474-7505

Fig. 2 – One of the “Did you know...?” advertisements published in a Fairbanks’ newspaper.

Fundraising challenges

My job in all this was to place the museum’s academic activities into a context that would be understood and appreciated by these visitors. Although most UAM employees could probably be considered conservationists, most potential donors were supporters of natural resource development, endorsing oil exploration and drilling, large scale mining, and extensive logging. Many were resistant to the concept of global warming, and thought it was invented by conservationists to prevent development. My line became “there’s a lot of emotion out there, conflicts between the

conservationists and developers, between those who want to stop all use of fossil fuels and those who think global warming is hogwash – most of it based on little or no information. The reason our museum is so very important is that our curators conduct research and provide the data upon which sensible decisions can be made about our state.” One could interpret this statement as one wished, and assume those data would support one’s own opinion. This seemed to convince the donors, who began to give funds, while it allowed us to maintain our integrity and honesty.

Our last challenge was to convince the wealthiest philanthropist in the state to donate to our campaign. This man was a great supporter of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, and was absolutely uninterested in our efforts to create an innovative gallery of Alaska art. He was, however, concerned about the state’s fisheries and sponsored a graduate fellowship on research in the Bering Sea. When a recipient of that fellowship gave a presentation to this donor about her work, she spoke at length about the importance of UAM’s sea lion collections. Soon after, we invited him to visit the curators, several of whom gave brief presentations on their research and introduced some of their especially articulate graduate students who described their scientific projects. Although he waited for some time, he eventually donated \$5 million specifically for collections and research. To honour him, we will name the part of UAM with collections and research the Elmer Rasmussen Alaska Natural and Cultural History Research Centre.

Some general principles can be extrapolated from the experiences of this campaign:

- a) Identify what concerns potential donors, and figure out an honest way to present the collections and research to address those concerns.
- b) Find some credible people outside the institution who can speak positively and hopefully donate funds specifically for research and collections.
- c) Introduce the curators and allow prospects

to see them work, explore the collections, if appropriate, handle 100 million year old dinosaur bones and 2000 year old archaeological artworks.

- d) Initiate a publicity campaign that features the most interesting and accessible work done by curators.

I am delighted we reached our goal last year, and broke ground in June 2002. If all goes according to plan, we will open our expanded and renovated museum in fall, 2005. Some donors gave money for art, some for education, but a good number gave funds for collections and research. And I consider that a tremendous success.

Acknowledgements

I thank Steven de Clercq and Gary Selinger for their careful reading of this manuscript. I also thank Kerynn Fisher for her assistance with the images.